

by Peter Stone Brown

For what is getting increasingly close to 50 years, I have been listening to Bob Dylan, playing his songs and writing about him. It has been a long, crazy and at times frustrating ride, but always interesting and continually fascinating.

I was 12-years-old when I started listening to Bob Dylan. It was the perfect time for him to come into my life. I'd grown up listening to folk music, Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, The Weavers and Leadbelly. So almost instinctively I understood what Dylan was doing. The way he sang, his voice was never an issue. My parents had instilled in me an appreciation for poetry and literature. When I heard Pete Seeger sing "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall," there was no doubt in my mind I was hearing poetry. A couple of months later when I heard Bob Dylan sing it and the other songs on *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*, he quickly became the central music figure in my life. I was a kid who was about to rebel and all of a sudden there was this singing rebel poet with songs that seemed to speak directly to me.

How much of a rebel Dylan was I had yet to find out. I saw Dylan for the first time a few months after first hearing *Freewheelin'*. Even though the concert was a short train ride from New York City, the show was far from sold out. Maybe five of the songs Dylan sang that night were from *Freewheelin'*. Many of the others as it turned out would appear on his next album, *The Times They Are A-Changin'*, and the remaining songs wouldn't be officially released for 30 years.

When I saw *The Times They Are A-Changin'* in my local record store a few months later, it became my first instant buy. It had none of the humor of *Freewheelin'*. The songs were deadly serious. And though Dylan left a clue with the last song on the album, "Restless Farewell," Dylan himself was soon to change and rebel against the role he'd been cast into, the so-called voice of a generation, the heir to Woody Guthrie ready to lead the masses to peace, justice and freedom.

When *Another Side of Bob Dylan* appeared at the end of the summer of 1964, gone were the topical songs. Gone was the dead serious tone. Instead the songs were personal, about relationships, usually ones that didn't work out, and a couple of comic songs. About the closest Dylan came to anything topical were the mentions of Cassius Clay, Barry Goldwater and Fidel Castro in the two more comical songs. There were two epic songs on the album, "My Back Pages," about Dylan's rejection of the role being forced on him and "Chimes of Freedom," a major poetical work. But the freedom Dylan sang about wasn't just the freedom from inequality, it was about personal

freedom, the freedom to be who you are no matter what. Musically a couple of songs on the album sounded suspiciously like rock and roll.

A couple of months after *Another Side* came out Dylan returned to New York City for his only concert that year at Philharmonic Hall on Halloween. What now can be seen as a minor controversy had emerged that fall in the pages of *Sing Out! Magazine*. *Sing Out!* was pretty much the Bible of the folk music world at the time, and Silber had penned an "Open Letter To Bob Dylan" chastising him for his move away from topical and protest songs. It was an outrageous and unheard of thing to do, but I wondered if Dylan was going to sing the songs I'd learn to love over the past year at the concert. He did that and more. At the time you didn't see Dylan just to see him play, you went to hear what new songs he had and what those songs would say. Not only did Dylan sing songs from *Times* and *Freewheelin'*, but sang several songs from *Another Side* for the first time in New York, but debuted five new songs, "Mr. Tambourine Man, It's Alright Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)," "Gates Of Eden," "Mama You Been On My Mind," and "If You Gotta Go."

A few months later in February of 1965, Dylan made a very rare TV appearance, on the Les Crane Show, a light night talk show where he was the primary guest, talking and mainly joking around for close to an hour. Before he sat down to talk he debuted a new song, "It's All Over Now Baby Blue." There were two things that signaled a major change was coming. Up until that time Dylan had always worn in concert a suede jacket and blue jeans. For Les Crane, he was wearing a suit and a shirt with cuff links. The more important change however was he had another guitarist with him, Bruce Langhorne a well known backup musician in folk circles playing a Martin acoustic guitar with a pickup. After chatting with Crane, Dylan performed "It's Alright Ma," again with Langhorne. "It's All Over Now Baby Blue" sounded even more like rock and roll than the songs on *Another Side*.

One night a few weeks after that, I was listening to a daily folk music show, "The Jerry White Show," which was broadcast in the New York metropolitan area. White said cautiously, "We have a new Bob Dylan single here, and played "Subterranean Homesick Blues." At first I didn't know what to think but bought the single as soon as it appeared in the store.

The answer to all this was *Bringing It All Back Home* which was released a few weeks later. One side was with a band, the other side was acoustic, with Langhorne backing Dylan on "Mr. Tambourine Man" and "It's All Over Now Baby Blue." Columbia Records promoted the album and Dylan like no Dylan album had been promoted before.

There were huge posters and little stand-ups of Dylan in shades wearing the suit and playing a Fender Stratocaster that either said, "Bob Dylan brings it all back home on Columbia Records," or "No one sings Dylan like Dylan." Dylan was on his way to becoming bigger than I'd ever imagined.

As for the album, I played "Mr. Tambourine Man" over and over endlessly, and no song ever seemed to express what I was feeling deep inside the way "It's Alright Ma" did.

That summer away at camp, one day in July my brother came up to me and said, "Dylan has a new single out. It has an organ on it." The song of course was "Like A Rolling Stone," and day I went crazy trying to find a radio to hear it. Within a few days it was played constantly on the Top 40 stations.

It was announced that Dylan would be playing Forest Hills Tennis Stadium in Queens, NY. Luckily it was the day camp ended. I went straight from the bus from camp to the show. Standing outside waiting to get in, we could hear a band playing over the walls of the stadium.

Forest Hills represented another major change in Dylan, the first being a line-up of major New York disc jockeys who introduced him including Jerry White. The rest were all AM radio top 40 dj's including the notorious Murray the K who was soundly booed.

Dylan opened up solo like his old concerts. The first song was "She Belongs To Me." There were no topical or protest songs. All the songs were either from *Another Side* or *Bringing It All Back Home*. During "She Belongs To Me," Dylan went to the side of the stage and posed for the press photographers. This had never happened before. He introduced one new song, "Desolation Row." During such lines as "One hand is on the tightrope walker, the other is in his pants," the crowd cracked up into hysterical laughter.

After the intermission on what turned out to be a cold windy night, Dylan came out with a band and launched into "Tombstone Blues." Boos and shouts of traitor erupted between the songs. The crowd was clearly divided. It was intense, and a riot could easily have erupted. Most of the songs in the set were new. Only three, "I Don't Believe You," "It Ain't Me Babe," and "Maggie's Farm" were on previous albums. A few times during the show a bunch of teenaged boys ran across the field onto the stage (which was nowhere near the audience). Dylan and the band never stopped playing, and cops

chased the kids in and around the musicians. Dylan closed the show with "Like A Rolling Stone," and did not return for an encore.

A couple of days later, I was walking with my brother on the main street of our town when from across the street I thought I saw what looked a new Dylan album in the window. It was *Highway 61 Revisited*. Everything we thought we were going to do that day ended right there. In fact life changed right at that moment.

If *Bringing It All Back Home* was a cautious step into rock and roll waters, *Highway 61 Revisited* was a full blown explosion musically and lyrically. The songs were full of crazed characters known and unknown, the lyrics crossing a mysterious line between absurd theater and poetry. Everything Dylan had been saying or trying to say before was in these songs though it took his critics as well as the public a little time to catch up. *Highway 61 Revisited* was also the beginning of the what does it mean discussions among Dylan fans that continue to this day.

I saw Dylan that October at the same theater I first saw him. I bought a ticket the day of the show and ended up with a ticket that said stage site. In those days on sold out shows they would often put seats on the audience onstage in folding chairs. While there were people sitting on the stage that night, when I arrived at the theater, they had put chairs over the orchestra pit in front of the regular chairs. My seat was front row center. The band turned out to be Levon & The Hawks. The song list was basically the same as Forest Hills, but a new song had been added, a rocked up version of "Baby Let Me Follow You Down" from Dylan's first album. Unlike Forest Hills there was no booing, and there was an encore, Dylan's current single "Positively Fourth Street," at the time high on the charts. I didn't know it at the time, but I wouldn't see Dylan in concert again for more than eight and a half years.

That autumn, winter and spring, there was a series of new Dylan singles though few of them became hits. Back then there wasn't an internet to broadcast nightly set lists. You had to look for any news. I knew Dylan had been recording in Nashville and had started a world tour. My brother had seen Dylan in February of '66 and told me about two new songs, "Seems Like A Freeze Out," and "Leopard-Skin Pill-Box Hat," and that he had rocked up "One Too Many Mornings."

That April a new Dylan single finally hit it big, his third single since "Positively Fourth Street," "Rainy Day Women # 12 & 35." By this time I knew the next Dylan album was going to be called *Blonde On Blonde*. I started calling local record stores and the Columbia

Records distribution center on a regular basis trying to find out when it would come out.

That June another Dylan single was released, "I Want You." The flipside was a major surprise, a live version of "Just Like Tom Thumb's Blues" recorded the month before in Liverpool, England. It was the first live Dylan to be released on Columbia. Finally I could hear again the sound I heard the previous October. I would play it full blast several times a day.

Finally at the end of June, *Blonde On Blonde* was finally released. It wasn't anything like *Highway 61*. Whereas quite a few of the songs on could be construed to be about society at large, most of the songs with the possible exception of "Memphis Blues Again" appeared to be about relationships. I was on my way to camp the day *Blonde On Blonde* was released. And while I listened to it camp, I had to wait until I was home to really delve into it. Less than a month after its release, my brother took me aside one day to tell me Dylan had been in a motorcycle accident. All that was in the *New York Times* the next day was a one-inch article saying Dylan had sustained injuries and his concert at the Yale Bowl was cancelled.

That little one-inch item in the *Times* was it. There was no news, no word at all for months. Today the media would have been encamped in Woodstock. Sometime the following spring an article appeared in the *New York Daily News*. A reporter had managed to find his house and talk to him. He was alive!

In the first week of January 1968, *John Wesley Harding* hit the stores. It was a return to a folk sound, but it wasn't. Dylan played acoustic guitar and harp backed only by bass and drums, and on two songs piano. Most of the songs were short mysterious ballads. The songs had no choruses. Most were three verses long, and the writing was very concise. Except for the two songs at the end, they all seemed to be parables and seemed to have a spiritual feel. When *John Wesley Harding* was released, what then was called rock music was at the heights of psychedelic excess. That would soon change.

Six months after *John Wesley Harding*, *Music From Big Pink* by The Band was released. This was the first album by the group that had backed Dylan in '65 and '66. The album had three Dylan songs, two co-written with members of the group. This was the first time anyone could recall Bob Dylan co-writing a song. More interesting was the fact that for the past six months various songs that it turned out were written by Dylan had been making their way onto the radio all done by

other artists, from Peter, Paul & Mary, to Manfred Mann to Flatt and Scruggs.

Late that summer there was an article in *Rolling Stone* magazine about the great lost Dylan album. Naturally, I had to get a copy. This was before bootleg records became visible. My first couple of copies were reel-to-reel tapes that were actually a tape of a tape of a tape of a tape. Every time a tape is dubbed, more sound quality is the further you get from the original. This made some of the spookier songs sound even more mysterious. The *Basement Tapes* were the great link between *Blonde on Blonde* and *John Wesley Harding* – sort of. Sort of because Dylan didn't pick up where he left off. A few years later it would be revealed there were other songs written after *Blonde On Blonde* that were entirely left behind. In fact the songs on the *Basement Tapes* were closer to *John Wesley Harding* in lyrics, music and structure than they were to *Blonde On Blonde*. The songs on the initial demo could be divided loosely into two kinds, serious songs that had a spiritual bent to them and kind of crazy funny songs. Sometimes the funny songs also had a spiritual angle as well. The *Basement Tapes* started a quest that went on for decades obtain the ultimate copy. This quest was complicated by the fact that over the years more songs would emerge which of course meant more best copies. Songs would continue to emerge from the *Basement Tapes* for the next 20 years creating an increasingly larger picture as the songs not only included more originals but several covers as well from traditional folk songs to country-western songs and covers of songs by some of Dylan's contemporaries.

Just as I was getting used to those songs, Dylan pulled yet another switch, and whatever forecast I was making for the direction of his lyrics and music based on the post *Blonde On Blonde* songs was about to come crashing down. I was living in New York City and word had gotten out that Dylan was going to be on a documentary on Johnny Cash to be broadcast on the educational TV station. Now keep in mind that unless you went to the Woody Guthrie Memorial Concert at Carnegie Hall that had sold out immediately, no one had seen Bob Dylan in three years. So a bunch of people are huddled around a tiny black and white TV in someone's apartment watching this documentary which turned out to be very well done. All of a sudden there he is with Johnny Cash in a recording studio, singing "One Too Many Mornings" to the trademark Cash boom chicka boom beat. Dylan's hair is shorter, he has this sort of beard, and he's chewing gum. To add to the suspense, Johnny Cash sang the first verse, and then on the second verse which starts, "It's a restless hungry feeling," out comes this smooth crooning baritone, and everyone was like what the hell was that? A few weeks later *Nashville Skyline* appeared

which was an album of nice romantic country-ish songs that took “what does this mean to an entirely different level.”

Things kind of stayed like that for the next few years, though Dylan sort of returned to an approximation of his old voice. Some songs were better than others, some albums better than others. Then in the fall of 1973 it was announced Dylan would be touring with The Band. Finally. As it turned out, it wasn't and couldn't be like it once was. Shows were now in hockey arenas. The Band played great, Dylan sang, well loudly. The best parts of the shows I saw, the second stop on the tour were the songs from then un-released *Planet Waves*. It seemed Dylan was saving the intensity for the newer stuff. The album itself found Dylan on the road somewhere but he hadn't quite found what he was looking for yet.

That road led to *Blood On The Tracks*, a total return to form and more. Everything that made Dylan Dylan was on that album, the vocal and lyric intensity, the way the lyrics seemed to connect to everything that was going on (even when they didn't), the literary and the musical references it was all there in a record so emotional that sometimes you don't want to listen to it because it will take you to a place where all you do is listen to that record.

Since that time Dylan's taken more twists and turns, had more phases and stages and guises and disguises than I can count. What I thought would happen in '69 ended up happening in '79. Every time I thought he was down for the count, he got up again and found another way.

So what does Bob Dylan mean to me? I could say he provided the soundtrack for my life, but that would be corny and also false. He's one part of a way larger soundtrack. In a sense he provided the roadmap to that sound track. He's not just a songwriter and he's not just a singer. Everything he does is on a million levels even when it isn't. He's a singer, songwriter, poet, musician, actor and magician and most importantly inspiration all at once. And no matter how many different bands he's had, no matter how many different hats he's worn on stage, to me he's always going to be that guy who came out alone with a guitar and could sing a song that could make you change the way you thought and felt about everything. But perhaps the greatest thing about Bob Dylan is he just pointed the direction. He always left it up to you to walk down the road.

